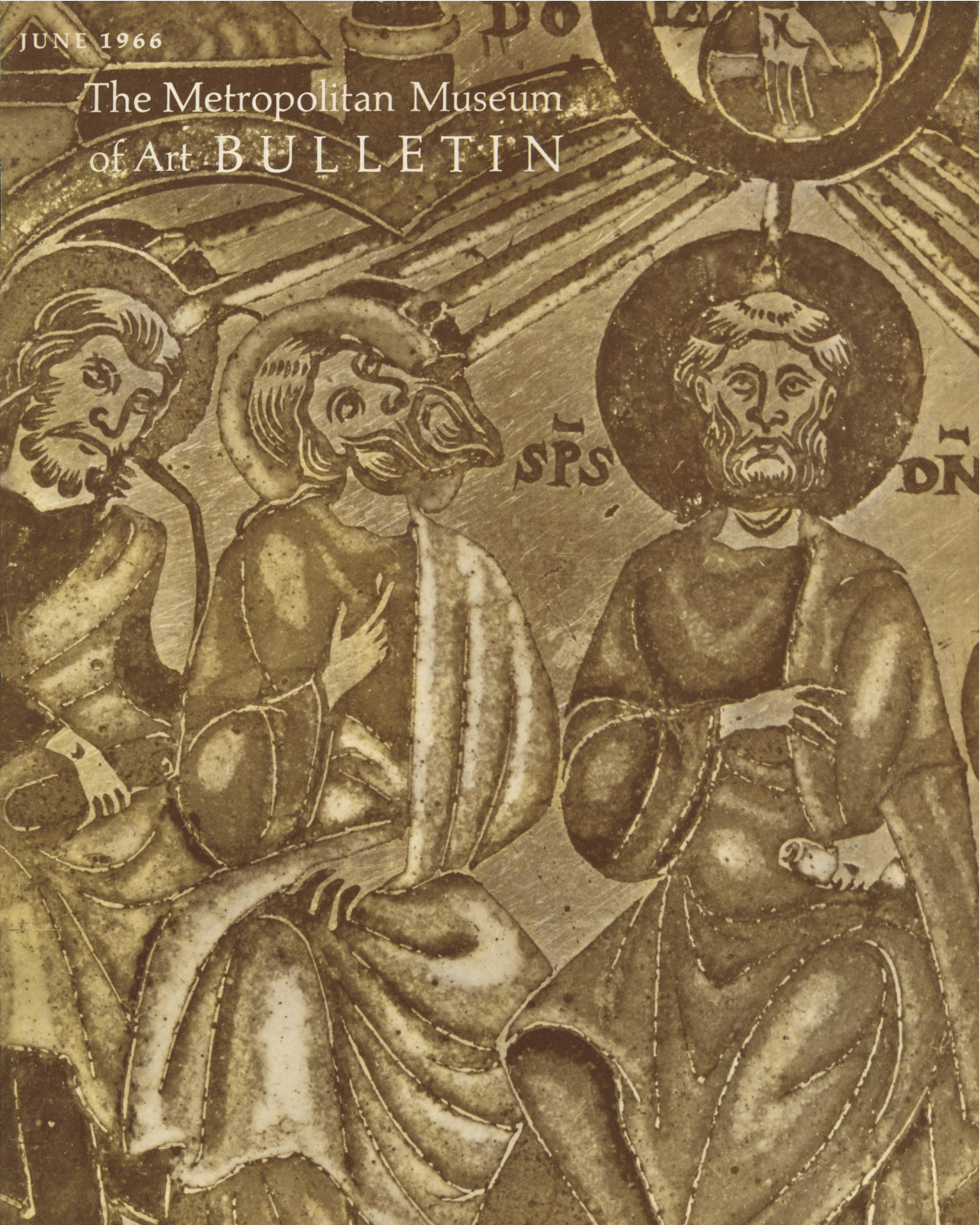
JUNE 1966

# The Metropolitan Museum of Art BULLETIN



# A Tapestry Altar Frontal
## *with Scenes from the Life of the Virgin*

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THE GREAT number of objects of art dedicated to the Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages bear witness to the important place her cult occupied in the spiritual lives of the people. St. Bernard, one of the earliest and greatest Marian writers, advises: "In difficult times remember Mary, appeal to Her, the Guiding Star." The Mother of God was glorified in representations of great variety; their contemplation brought comfort and hope to the faithful. It is not in the Gospels themselves but in the Apocrypha and devotional writings that one finds the many detailed, poetical descriptions of the events of her life that served as sources of inspiration for medieval artists. A good example is a series of six scenes from the Life of the Virgin shown in a charming and colorful tapestry (Figure 2) at The Cloisters. This tapestry is an altar frontal of German workmanship, of the third quarter of the fifteenth century. It was made in the Upper Rhine region, i.e. the region comprising several German-speaking provinces that has been well defined by Heinrich Kohlhaussen as "a half-circle of about 60 miles radius, with Basel an approximate center, . . . encompassing the bend of the Rhine . . . and including St. Gall, Constance, Freiburg in Breisgau, Basel and Strasbourg."

The fifteenth-century political subdivisions of western Europe did not correspond with those of the present. In this region there existed alliances of towns and connections among and within dioceses, such as that between Basel (which did not join the Swiss

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THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART *Bulletin*
VOLUME XXIV, NUMBER 10 JUNE 1966

Published monthly from October to June and quarterly from July to September. Copyright © 1966 by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fifth Avenue and 82nd Street, New York, N.Y. 10028. Second class postage paid at New York, N. Y. Subscriptions $5.00 a year. Single copies fifty cents. Sent free to Museum members. Four weeks' notice required for change of address. Back issues available on microfilm from University Microfilms, 313 N. First Street, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Editor-in-chief: Gray Williams, Jr.; Editors: Suzanne Boorsch, Anne Preuss, Katharine H. B. Stoddert, and Leon Wilson. Designer: Peter Oldenburg.

OPPOSITE:
*1. The Birth of the Virgin. Detail of the altar frontal discussed on pages 287-303*

ON THE COVER:
*Detail of The Pentecost, a Mosan enamel plaque illustrated in color on page 305*



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2. *Altar frontal with scenes from the Life of the Virgin. German (Upper Rhine), third quarter of the XV century. Tapestry; wool, silk, and metal threads on a linen warp. 3 feet 5 inches x 11 feet 6 inches. Gift of Charles F. Iklé, 57.126*

federation till 1501) and Besançon in the Franche-Comté; relations between various religious houses were also close. A text written in the St. Andreas convent of Engelberg, Switzerland admonishes: "And do remember before God all those who share their alms with us, such as those of Strassburg . . . and Basel." Towns and monasteries shared not only alliances and incomes, but artistic traditions as well. Thus, for example, in 1335 a Franciscan monk living in Venice sent "a linen, painted" with the design of a stained-glass window in his church, to another Franciscan monastery to be copied there. Artists of various nationalities traveled widely, up and down the Rhine and over the Alps. New ideas were brought from Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Bohemia, and France (both from Paris and Avignon), and these in turn influenced one another. Some of the trends came filtered through Burgundy, itself a melting pot of Italo-Netherlandish art. The court of the Burgundian dukes, with its wealth and generous patronage, attracted the best artists and the best works of art from everywhere.

Many of the outstanding native artists in the Upper Rhine region also traveled. Master Haincelin de Haguenot (Hans, or Hänslein of Hagenau) worked in Avignon and Paris, and for Philip the Bold of Burgundy around the turn of the century, becoming a completely French artist. One Hance de Constance was also in Burgundian service, in 1425. Hans Tiefental worked in Dijon for John the Fearless before returning to his native country; here in 1418 he was requested to repeat, in the Elendkreuzkapelle (Basel), the Champmol abbey wall decorations of which he owned drawings. Stephan Lochner went from the Constance region in the late 1430s to Cologne, to become one of its greatest masters, and it was in the Upper Rhine region that Master E. S. recorded in his prints much of what he had seen in various places.

The whole of the region shared the traits of a common artistic inheritance and the imprint of the same outside influences, which crisscrossed this part of Europe in the late fourteenth and in the fifteenth centuries. Great masterpieces, known either in originals or in copies – so numerous in the fifteenth century – and through drawings in the *vademecum* booklets carried about by many artists, also left lasting impressions.

The great councils in Constance (1414-1418) and in Basel (1431-1438) brought together not only prelates of the Church and secular potentates from the whole of Europe, but merchants, tradesmen, and artists as well. The participants brought and displayed many art treasures, which were admired, copied, and later imitated. To repeat, more or less accu-

rately, an admired work of art or a venerated image was a desirable and often requested procedure.

The high period of German tapestry weaving, with its main centers located around the Rhine, was of short duration. It lasted roughly through the fifteenth century and into part of the sixteenth. The tapestries, woven in considerable numbers, were, in certain points, very different from those woven in France and the Lowlands. Most contemporary Flemish and French tapestries were made in large sizes in professional workshops, by weavers belonging to guilds and thoroughly trained in their craft. The designs and cartoons were sometimes prepared by outstanding artists, and the orders came from rich noble or royal customers, or from great churches. The less spectacular German tapestries, especially the Upper Rhenish ones, were usually made in small workshops. They were woven mostly by women: often housewives, as a kind of home industry, and for the relatively modest homes of burghers or patrician families; or else by nuns in convents, who deemed the occupation with handicrafts, in time free from prayers, to be just another pious activity, "to honor God and to glorify the saints." The very popular lay tapestries illustrated romances and allegories, such as the symbolical struggle between virtues and vices in the guise of Wild Men. In the case of tapestries made for churches religious subjects would be chosen.

In published records of the Upper Rhine region – chronicles, wills, inventories, and account books – there are many mentions of tapestries, as well as information from which the history of their weaving and use can be reconstructed. An account book of Basel Cathedral for 1480-1481 shows a special item in the budget covering the expenses "through the year" for the "hanging up, and taking down again, of tapestries in the choir." In inventories of other churches and chapels are listed such items as a tapestry altar frontal "used for Our Lord's Advent," or one "with the Entombment of the Saviour," or simply "thirteen" or even "twenty-four" tapestry altar frontals.

Among the possessions left by deceased "housewives" are mentioned not only the finished products of their handicrafts, but also looms, tools, and wool for tapestry weaving. In one list, of 1519, there appears "*ein bildner für heidnischwerk*" ("a picture for tapestry weaving") – no doubt a tapestry cartoon – and in 1577 "nine painted pattern books for tapestry weavers." An inventory of 1414, of a Basel burgomaster, speaks of a "*Heidnischwirkerin*" (a woman tapestry weaver) as a member of the household. Numerous nuns are listed in Constance as working in this capacity; nuns weaving tapestries are pictured on borders of tapestries themselves (Figure 19), and in wall and panel paintings.

Other documents record the process of the dispersion of tapestries. The Basel Chronicle for 1529 states: "The selling of church paraments has begun . . ., of chasubles and albs, of tapestries, and similar other things which had served for idolatry," and the records for the same year of the Poor Clares, in Freiburg in Breisgau, tell us that, "There came from the holy house of the Poor Clares, Gnadenthal, in Basel . . ., the abbess and four nuns . . . and they brought with them many a beautiful godly church adornment . . . choir books, and tapestry altar frontals."

In general, German tapestries were objects of ordinary use rather than luxury items. Because of the modest requirements, and the small workshops and looms, many of the tapestries are themselves small, and woven as narrow strips. Although each part of the Upper Rhenish region may show a certain degree of artistic individuality, to establish by style the exact location of a workshop of tapestry weaving is often not possible.

What Upper Rhenish tapestries lack in size and impressiveness, they amply compensate for by their truly two-dimensional, decorative effect, and by their strong design. They use a juxtaposition of color areas comparable to that in stained-glass windows, instead of the gradual shading of the Flemish and French tapestries of the period, achieved by a complicated technique of hatchings *(hachures)*. Tapestries were woven of wool; for details linen thread was occasionally used, or white goat's

*3. The Birth of the Virgin. Woodcut from Spiegel der menschen behaltnis, printed by Peter Drach (Speyer, after 1476). Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 31.53*

*4, 5. The Birth of the Virgin, and the Annunciation. Illuminations from the dedication page of Défense de la Conception Immaculée de la Vierge, translated by Antoine de Villars. French, 1447-1460. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MS Fr. 989, f. 3*

LEFT:

6. *The Annunciation. Detail of the altar frontal at The Cloisters*

RIGHT:

7. *The Annunciation, attributed to the Master of the Nuremberg Passion. German (Upper Rhine), middle of the XV century. Woodcut, about 7 3/16 x 5 5/8 inches. Formerly in the Stadtbibliothek, Bern. (Plate 33 in Die Anfänge des Kupferstiches by Max Geisberg, Leipzig, 1924)*

wool, which has a silky sheen. The features of the faces were sometimes touched up with embroidery stitches. Silk and metal threads, used lavishly in the sumptuous Flemish tapestries, were used only occasionally in the German ones.

One finds wool, linen, silk, and both silver and gold threads in the Cloisters tapestry, which distinguishes it as quite a rich piece, despite its apparent modesty. Its beautiful colors are somewhat faded on the front and appear subdued, but on the back the delicate combinations of warm reds, pinks, and purples, offset by cooler greens and blues, are almost intact.

German tapestry designs were either created by individual weavers, or else they were adapted from paintings, illuminations, or prints, while the latter, in turn, were apt to repeat more famous works of art. From so-called *petits patrons* ("small patterns") full-size cartoons were prepared. It is on these and on the weaver that the personality of the tapestry depended. The compositions of the scenes in this tapestry follow iconographical patterns popular in the Upper Rhine region at the time, but not unknown elsewhere, both inside and outside Germany. The naïve simplicity of the design is permeated with grace

RIGHT:

8. *The Annunciation, attributed to the Master of the Frankfurt Paradise Garden. German (Upper Rhine, possibly Basel), about 1420-1440. Tempera on wood, 7 5/8 x 5 1/8 inches. Oskar Reinhart Collection, Winterthur*

and tender harmony, which tempts one to look for traces of a lost work of some great master, whose imprint could not be erased by passage through transitional stages.

The subject – the Life of the Virgin – would have been a very appropriate choice for a tapestry woven in a convent. The nuns had an especially deep feeling for the Virgin Mary, a woman like themselves, and at the same time the sublime image of the ideals of humility and charity for which they were striving. The six scenes represented are the Birth of the Virgin, the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Presentation of Christ at the Temple combined with the Purification of the Virgin, and the Coronation of the Virgin. All six events were celebrated in the Middle Ages as the Feast Days of the Virgin, the Coronation standing here for her Assumption. Only four of the six scenes are described in the New Testament, but all six, at one time or another, have been used to illustrate the Hours of the Virgin. The sequence could be given a symbolical interpretation – the Redemption of Mankind: first the Birth of the Virgin, with which the atonement of Original Sin begins; then the incarnation of Christ in the Annunciation; the meeting of the Old (St. Elisabeth) and the New (Virgin Mary) Testaments in the Visitation; Christ's birth as the Son of Man in the Nativity; his sacrifice and redemption in the Temple, as a prefiguration of his sacrifice on the cross; and his triumph over death (the consequence of Original Sin) in the Coronation of the Virgin in heaven.

On the tapestry three of the scenes show interiors and are arranged in the manner of boxlike "mansions" in liturgical plays, presenting rooms with the wall nearest to the spectator removed and the uprights and rafters framing the picture. The two central scenes are set into realistic landscapes, approaching the very border of the panels, and divided only by a brick wall in one of them.

Along the top of the tapestry runs a red strip with a vine scroll interspersed with stylized columbine flowers. In its center, two flying angels hold the veil of Veronica, which may be a reminder of the Passion and of the Host on the altar. At the bottom of the strip is woven a pattern imitating a multicolored fringe, as if the strip were a separate frontlet of an altar cloth.

The grouping of the landscape scenes in the center, with the placing of the motif of the Veronica above, and the consistent harmony of colors, serve to create a much-needed cohesion within the tapestry, because although the whole tapestry is woven in one piece, each of the scenes is a self-contained picture and has its own individual – even if imperfect – vanishing point.

The Birth of the Virgin (Figure 1) has for its setting a comfortable bedroom typical of a mid-fifteenth-century burgher's home. Its varicolored tiled floor, flat timbered ceiling, and diamond-paned windows appear in the other interior scenes as well. The scene illustrates the text of the apocryphal Protoevangelium, according to which Anne, having given birth to a child, said, " 'My soul is magnified this day,' and . . . laid herself down." Behind St. Anne's bed is a wall hanging with a pomegranate pattern – a pattern used in several of the other scenes. It is obvious that the infant Mary has just been bathed, as she is half-wrapped in a cloth, while another is dropped over the edge of a wooden tub of water in the foreground. Her hair is long, and the locks turn upward at the ends to form hook shapes, as do those of the woman holding

OPPOSITE:

*9. The Visitation. Detail of the altar frontal at The Cloisters*

*10. The Visitation. German (Upper Rhine) or North Swiss, about 1505. Tapestry fragment, about 33 x 32¾ inches. (After Figure 40 in Wandteppiche: Die germanischen und slawischen Länder, I, by Heinrich Goebel, Berlin, 1933)*

OPPOSITE:

*11. The Nativity. Detail of the altar frontal at The Cloisters*

*12. The Nativity. Drawing in a manuscript of Speculum Humanae Salvationis from Neustift. Tyrolean, about 1420. Pen and ink with wash. Universitätsbibliothek, Innsbruck, Cod. 166*

her. These hooks, as well as the strikingly red lips and strongly outlined fingernails, appear throughout the tapestry.

For the composition of this scene, as for all of the others in the tapestry, no specific models can be found, only related examples indicating that the compositions were known in the Upper Rhine region at the time. It is close to those in several stained-glass windows in Alsace, as in the church at Altthann, made in 1466, or in the two almost identical windows of 1460-1461 in Walburg and in St. Wilhelm's church in Strasbourg. The difference in the latter windows is that the newborn child is being bathed by one of the attending women, while the other offers food to the mother. Robert Bruck, writing on Alsatian stained glass, finds a relationship in the designs for these and other Alsatian windows to the style of Master E. S., and notes that many of the subjects could go back to lost paintings.

For the portrayal of the Virgin with long hair – not a usual way of representing a newborn child – it is harder to find parallels. Still, it can be seen on a woodcut (Figure 3) in *Spiegel der menschen behaltnis* ("The Mirror of Human Salvation"), printed by Peter Drach in Speyer shortly after 1476, but showing earlier traits in the illustrations. The detail of the long hair probably has its origin in the Netherlands, because it can be seen on the fragment of a painted altar frontal of about 1400, from Cortessem, near Liège. A newborn Virgin Mary with long hair also appears in a French miniature of about 1447-1460 (Figure 4). On the same page are several devotional scenes, one of them (Figure 5) repeating in general terms the Annunciation by Robert Campin (now at The Cloisters). The connection with Campin may be significant, as a trace of his influence may also be seen in the Annunciation panel of the tapestry.

The scene of the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-35) takes place again in a cozy room (Figure 6), with a flat wooden ceiling, a tiled floor, and windows with diamond panes in the far wall. Along this wall, a curtain is half-drawn behind the railing of Mary's bed. It is a chamber like this that Arnoul Gréban probably had in mind when he made the Virgin say in his mystery play, "Here . . . [in this] pretty and pleasant little room . . . I would like to read my Psalter, one psalm after another, all the way through." The Virgin sits on a low, boxlike seat, an open book on her knees. At her feet stands a wooden book box, used for the protection of her valuable book – a Psalter, or Isaiah's prophecies of the Incarnation, which according to certain writers the Virgin was reading on the day of the Annunciation. She raises her hands in bewilderment, and the pages of the book seem to be turning over, released from her fingers.

The Archangel Gabriel has entered the room by the door on the right, leaving it slightly ajar, and is kneeling before the Virgin. He holds in his right hand the staff of a herald, and with his left he makes a gesture indicating that he is speaking, or has just spoken. According to Pseudo-Bonaventura's *Meditations on the Life of Christ*, the Archangel kneels in reverence to the Virgin only after he has delivered his message and she accepts God's will by saying, "Be it done to me according to thy word," and thus becomes Mother of God. Some scholars explain the kneeling of the angel before the Virgin more prosaically, by the influence of the acting in liturgical plays. Over his white alb he wears a red sleeveless vestment with a pomegranate pattern brocaded in gold, the sides held together only by clasps at the waist. This mantle or surcoat is somewhat unusual, as it is neither the dalmatic nor cope ordinarily shown in this scene. It may possibly be a vestment derived by gradual changes from the dalmatic, which has long slits along the side seams but always has sleeves. This vestment seems to have the shape of a tabard, worn by heralds or travelers; one finds angels of the Annunciation wearing similar tabards both in German and North Italian paintings of approximately the same period.

There is great expressiveness in this scene. The mild shyness of the Virgin, the arrested movement of the angel's entry, the tense moment in the quiet of a secluded room are vividly and beautifully portrayed; the use of metal threads to enrich details adds solemnity to the otherwise simple setting. For this scene on the tapestry one finds, among a number of

OPPOSITE:

*13. The Presentation of Christ at the Temple. Detail of the altar frontal at The Cloisters*

comparable representations, at least two that are almost identical iconographically. The closest of all is a single-sheet print (Figure 7) by the Master of the Nuremberg Passion, of which only one copy, glued to the flyleaf of an incunabulum, is known. The book was printed in Ulm in 1483, but the print is earlier and was probably inserted when the book was bound. It is fortunate that it has been reproduced, because its present whereabouts are unknown.

The tapestry panel is an almost exact translation of the print into the medium of weaving, so that it has even been suggested that the tapestry panel is a direct copy from it. The disposition of the figures, the arrangement of the room, the reversal of the angel's hands (who should be holding the staff in his left hand and "addressing" the Virgin with his right) are the same, as are his upswept wings, the wreath on his curls, and the unusual vestment.

The divergences are few. While there are bull's-eye windowpanes in the print, there are diamond panes in the tapestry. The shelf and dishes over the door and the towel on the rod do not appear in the tapestry, and the seven rays on which the dove of the Holy Spirit descends (symbolizing the seven spirits in the prophecies of Isaiah 11:1-3) are reduced, incorrectly, to five. Some details of the tapestry are more elaborate – the angel's brocaded tabard, for example, and the ermine lining of Mary's cloak – and the tapestry as a whole has a richer effect. Another difference is the pitcher in the foreground: in the tapestry it is plain, and contains the lily; in the print it is decorated like Italian majolica, contains a bunch of flowers, and is accompanied by a potted plant, cut in topiary work. The placing of the lily in the pitcher is considered to be in the Northern tradition and appears in numerous German and Flemish paintings, including Robert Campin's Annunciation. The topiary plant, on the other hand, is in the Italian tradition, although it is found in several instances in German art. Like other Italian traits, this detail was probably transmitted through Northern interpretations.

The print in turn resembles a slightly earlier Upper Rhenish painting of about 1420-1440 (Figure 8) even more closely than it resembles the tapestry. This small painting, in the collection of Oskar Reinhart in Winterthur, Switzerland, is attributed to the Master of the Frankfurt Paradise Garden (sometimes identified with Hans Tiefental), to whom has also been tentatively attributed a copy (in Prague) of Campin's Annunciation. Both print and painting are almost the same size, and correspond in virtually every detail, except that the composition of the print is in reverse. This often happens when printmakers copy paintings: the design is copied correctly onto the printing surface but appears reversed on the print itself.

The fact that the tapestry scene is also reversed might suggest that it follows the print rather than the painting. However, it also may be that the inspiration came from the painting (despite differences in color between the two) and that the reversal may have occurred during weaving, for a tapestry weaver inserts his colored yarns from the back of the piece, and thus sometimes achieves a mirror image of the cartoon being copied. It is also possible that the tapestry copies neither the print nor the painting directly, but that there existed other intermediaries, or an original now unknown, that provided the immediate model. However, it is obvious that the three works all belong to a closely related group.

The Visitation (Figure 9) takes place in a wooded and rocky setting, in accordance with the text of St. Luke: "And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste." The composition is more or less traditional for the period, the realistic landscape, which forms an integral part of the scene, appearing shortly after 1400 in the illumination of the Boucicaut Hours. The background is kept rather dark, and the colors have a bluish tinge. While the meeting does not take place near St. Elisabeth's home, the buildings at the upper right might be an allusion to the City of Juda, where, according to Luke, Mary was going to meet her cousin. The two women stand in a flowery meadow, where herbaceous plants alternate with clumps of pink, purple, and white flowers. One can

*14. The Coronation of the Virgin. Tyrolean (Brixen), about 1400. Tempera and gold leaf on wood, 81½ x 30¼ inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 44.77*

OPPOSITE:

*15. The Coronation of the Virgin. Detail of the altar frontal at The Cloisters*

presume that the large plant in bloom in the left corner is an iris, and the small flowers near the feet of St. Elisabeth are "the rose without thorns" of the Middle Ages, known in German as the "spring rose." Both flowers sometimes have symbolic connotations in this scene, with the iris ("sword lily" in German) taking the place of the lily. At the left grows a flower with a purple corona and a yellow trumpet, found in many Upper Rhenish decorative ornaments of the period.

Several details could have been inspired by the text of the Song of Songs, introduced into the Office for the Feast of the Visitation because Mary and the bride of the Song were identified with the Christian Church, and the Virgin was given some of the glorifying epithets of Solomon's beloved. She was named a flower of the fields, a lily of the valley; she became the pigeon of the rocks – "My dove in the clefts of the rock" – and this might be suggested by the large bird with a small crest on its head standing on the rocks to the left. The stag that appears at the right of the scene may also be inspired by the Song of Songs: "My beloved is like a roe or a young hart: behold, he cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping upon the hills." The stag was identified both with Christ and with the Virgin. It was said elsewhere that when Mary was on her way to St. Elisabeth the grass rejoiced under her feet, the flowers were springing up, and mountains and hills were glad when she drew nigh.

One could list a number of iconographically related miniatures, paintings, and stained-glass windows – French, Flemish, and, especially, German – but one comparison has to be singled out: a fragment of a tapestry (Figure 10), somewhat later in style, dating from about 1505, of Upper Rhenish or possibly North Swiss workmanship, and also made of wool with silk and metal threads. It was in a study of this fragment that Heinrich Goebel used the term *Hackenlocken* to describe the hook-shaped strands of the hair. He used this feature to distinguish a whole group of tapestries that he related in turn to South Netherlandish woodcuts known widely during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in the region between Basel and Lake Constance. Although Goebel does not include in this group the tapestry at The Cloisters, the latter shows the peculiarity of the hook-shaped locks.

The Nativity scene (Figure 11) follows the descriptions found in several writings of medieval mystics. It is St. Bridget who describes the event in greatest detail, and says that the Virgin, her beautiful golden hair spread over her shoulders, knelt before her newborn babe, who was lying on the ground, naked, "wrapped in an unspeakably bright light." Although the skies here are just as dark and the greenery just as sober as in the Visitation, through the use of a scale of warm colors in the bricks and in many details of the clothing, and through the subtle combination of colored and metal thread, the weaver has imparted to the night scene a luminosity lacking in the preceding daytime one.

The thatch-covered shed with its ruined stone wall, the wicket enclosure, the donkey who brought the Holy Family to Bethlehem, and the ox who followed them are all part of the usual setting for a Nativity. But one peculiarity has to be pointed out: the Virgin is not looking down at the Christ Child whom she is adoring, but up, at God the Father. According to St. Bridget, the Virgin looked toward God the Father only before the Child was born; after his birth she did not have to look upward to Heaven, as Heaven was on the ground before her. Nevertheless, the representation on the tapestry is not unique. One finds it, for example, in a Nativity scene of about 1400-1420 by the Constance Master, in the Rosgarten Museum, Constance, and it also appears in a pen drawing (Figure 12) illustrating a Tyrolean manuscript of the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis* ("The Mirror of Human Salvation") of about 1420 or slightly later. It may have been inspired by some other text, in which the Virgin thanks God for having given her the Son, or it may be simply a regional peculiarity.

In the next scene (Figure 13) are represented two events celebrated by the Church on the same day: the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, and the Purification of the Virgin. Jewish law decreed that every first-

born boy was to be presented at the temple, to serve there after reaching adulthood. But if the child was from the tribe of Judah, as Christ was, he could be redeemed for the price of "five pieces of money" – five shekels. The same law decreed that the mother of the boy was not to participate in public worship until the day of his presentation at the temple, at which time she was "purified" and was to make an offering of a pair of turtledoves or young pigeons. St. Luke (2:22-31) tells how Simeon, a just and devout man in Jerusalem to whom it was granted that he should not die before he had seen the Redeemer, came, inspired by the Holy Ghost, to meet the Child,

and having recognized the Saviour, said, "Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: for mine eyes have seen thy salvation."

The composition, with a compact group around an altar, probably derives from Italo-Byzantine and Italian ones, such as that by Ambrogio Lorenzetti of 1342. It was taken over by such masters as Melchior Broederlam, for his Champmol retable of the 1390s; by Jacques Daret, the pupil of Robert Campin, for a panel of the retable he painted in 1434 for the church of St. Vaast in Arras; and by Stephan Lochner, on the wing of a retable painted in 1445.

On the tapestry only the altar gives an indication of the temple setting. Otherwise it is not different from the domestic interiors. Here, the only time on the tapestry, Mary is shown dressed as a matron: she wears a wimple. Behind her, leaning on a staff, stands St. Joseph. Christ is seated on the altar and his head is turned back toward his mother; according to the *Meditations* of Pseudo-Bonaventura, "the Boy . . . looking at his mother, bowed to show that he wished to go to Simeon," and his posture may illustrate this or a similar text. Simeon, in a chasuble-like brocaded vestment over a white alb, is represented here as a priest, as he is quite often apt to be, although all the texts refer to him as a layman. His hands are raised as if to receive the Child, but it might be that the scene represents the moment when the Child is being returned to his mother, because the redemption seems to have taken place already: the five silver coins are lying on the altar.

The young woman standing behind the altar is not the Prophetess Anna, who according to the Gospels was present at the meeting, but rather a servant maid who is said to have accompanied the Holy Family – a substitution favored in the paintings north of the Alps. In her right hand she holds a basket with the two doves and in her left a tall, twisted lighted candle. This refers to the custom of having a procession on the Feast of the Purification in which the participants, to the singing of the antiphon "Magnificat," carry lighted candles; the custom gave the name of "Candlemas" to this joyous and solemn festivity.

The most interesting detail in this scene is the presence of five silver coins, with a fleur-de-lis on each, lying on the altar. The earliest appearance of coins in the representation of this scene seems to be in a drawing illustrating a fourteenth-century Italian manuscript of Pseudo-Bonaventura's *Meditations* (MS ital. 115, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris), where St. Joseph is shown placing the money in the hand of a cleric. One does not find the theme again until 1447, when Stephan Lochner picks it up for his Presentation retable, now in the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt. In the

latter case the coins show profiles surrounded by inscriptions, and not fleurs-de-lis. The use of florins (as coins bearing the fleur-de-lis were called) was too widespread in Italy and Germany in the fifteenth century to help localize the tapestry. They were current in both Florence and Strasbourg, for example. Burgundian coins also had a fleur-de-lis, but quartered as on the arms of the Burgundian dukes. Although florins were not the official currency in Basel, they were accepted in payment from out-of-town visitors during the Council.

The scene of the Coronation of the Virgin (Figure 15) portrays her greatest glory. She is identified again with the bride of Lebanon in the Song of Songs (4:8) to whom were addressed the words: "Come from Libanus, my beloved, . . . come: thou shalt be crowned." In illuminated Hours of the Virgin, the scene of the Coronation, in which were combined the ideas of the Virgin's Dormition and her Assumption to Heaven, is usually related to the text of the last service of the day, the Compline.

Only the small portion of blue sky, with its border of crinkly clouds, suggests that the scene takes place in heaven, for the tiled floor is the same as that in the interiors. All three persons of the Holy Trinity have cruciferous nimbi. Christ holds the crown over the kneeling Virgin's head, while God the Father simply blesses her. In contrast to the rich vestments of God the Father, Christ is clothed in a plain purple robe; his red mantle has slipped off his shoulders. He has no crown, and on his hand the nail wound is visible. The differentiation between the appearance of Father and Son is frequently encountered in Coronation scenes during the second half of the fifteenth century. The composition seems to be reversed, as it is in the Annunciation scene. Thus, God the Father sits at the left, to the right of his Son, while in accordance with the words of the Credo it should be the opposite ("He sitteth at the right hand of the Father"). The wrong hand, furthermore, is used by God the Father in blessing. Again it is possible that the tapestry follows a reversed print after a painting, or the reversal might be due to the tapestry being woven from a cartoon that

*16-18. The Annunciation (left), the Nativity, and the Presentation of Christ at the Temple. Woodcuts from the Meditations by Johannes de Turrecremata, printed by Ulrich Hahn (Rome, 1473). Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 27.56*

was prepared without taking into account the "right" and the "left" of the finished work.

This composition of the Coronation, showing the Virgin with the Trinity and, usually, both God the Father and Christ crowning her, appeared around the end of the fourteenth century, probably under the influence of theological writings, in which a tendency arose of including the Virgin in the mystical contemplation of the indivisible Trinity. After the turn of the century, this composition became increasingly popular and gradually replaced earlier types, in which Christ and the Virgin are represented alone or with God the Father blessing from above. The idea of the Virgin humbly kneeling, while being crowned as a queen, also proved to be appealing.

Although these changes in art are believed to be due to Netherlandish influence, they are found as early as 1400 in a Tyrolean painting (Figure 14) that has a composition very close to that on the tapestry. In style, however, the tapestry is closer to another painting: the Coronation panel of the so-called Staufen altar of the first third of the fifteenth century, which has been attributed by some scholars to the same master as the Winterthur panel. Very similar angels are found in this scene, but the composition is of the earlier type.

The Cloisters tapestry has been included in several studies of Upper Rhenish art of the period, but in none of these has any attempt been made to establish anything beyond its stylistic relationship with other works of the region. No one has tried to find a connection with any outside source of influence. It has, however, been suggested that the six scenes might repeat part of a more extensive single series. If so, then the closely related Winterthur panel of the Annunciation and the tapestry fragment of the Visitation must also derive from such a series. The Winterthur panel might then be either a survivor of, or a copy from, a lost retable composed of a series of small scenes, known as a *Biblia picta*, or "Picture Bible." Several such retables still exist; the most famous among them, dated about 1430-1435, comes from the Minster of Our Lady in Roermond and is now in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. It consists of three rows of small panels of the Life of Christ, each only a little larger than the Winterthur panel. Here interiors also alternate with landscapes.

Or the original could have been a series of manuscript illuminations. One does see certain similarities to the tapestry in several contemporary or slightly earlier manuscripts, among them the Book of Hours of Catherine of Cleves, completed in Utrecht in 1431. But in none of these can one find anything more than a general feeling of relationship and only a common source can be suspected. A connection to such a common source for the tapestry could be, for instance, the "Vullenhoe Group" of manuscript illuminators, employed in the workshop of Hendrik van Vullenhoe, a Carthusian monk from Utrecht who transferred his activity to Basel in 1435. His shop is said to have worked after Franco-Netherlandish models; some of these models could have also been known in Utrecht.

Still another possibility exists – of the direct influence of a great master. Some scholars believe, for example, that Robert Campin stayed in Basel during the Council. In 1438 he finished the Werl altarpiece, on which figures the portrait of the donor, Heinrich von Werl, a theologian from Cologne who took part in the Council in Basel from 1432 on. Several details of the Annunciation scene on the tapestry, as well as on the small painting and the single-sheet print, do show certain Campinesque qualities, and one can say about it (as has been said about other paintings) that if it is not derived from Campin, then both it and Campin's Annunciation derive from something else.

One might also look for a series of tapestries as the point of derivation for at least some of the scenes on the Cloisters tapestry. And here one comes across a very tempting, but uncertain possibility, because only written records have survived concerning an important tapestry series, and not all of its subjects are the same as those on the altar frontal. The story is longish and not simple, but still worth telling.

The archives of the Burgundian dukes disclose that in 1423 Philip the Good sent as a present to Pope Martin V six handsome tapestries, "very richly woven" with stories of the Life of the Virgin. It is also noted that on

September 11, 1423, Jehan Arnolfini, a Lucca merchant living in Bruges, was paid "the sum of 345 livres . . . for six tapestry panels . . . with several stories of Our Lady: . . . the Annunciation, Nativity, Announcement to the Shepherds, Circumcision, The Assumption of Our Lady and her Coronation, . . . which were bought from said Arnolfini . . . to be taken . . . to the Court of Rome, and to be presented there to Our Holy Father the Pope." Incidentally, it was about this time that the Pope's approval had been asked for the engagement of the Duke's niece, Catherine of Cleves, to Arnold of Geldern, which required the Pope's dispensation because of the close blood relationship between the two. It was for this young lady that the Book of Hours mentioned earlier was made; thus both the manuscript and the tapestries were acquired by members of the same family.

These tapestries are no longer among those owned by the Vatican, and their fate is unknown. But in the inventories of papal possessions for the year 1464, one finds among the tapestries "six small panels of the Virgin Mary, notably [*videlicet*] that of the Annunciation," which are probably the same series. In the inventory of 1518 they do not figure any longer.

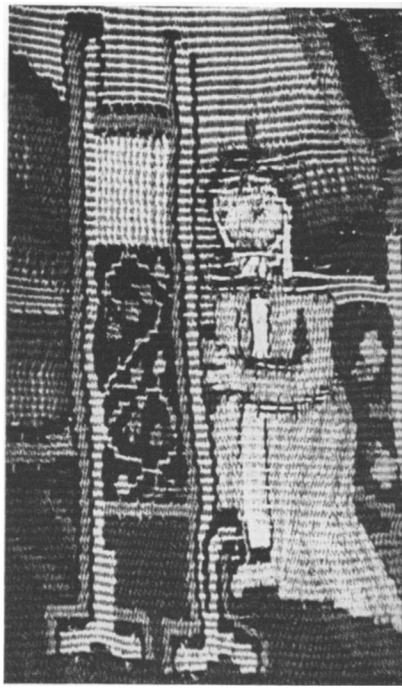
They must have been precious Arras or Tournai tapestries, worthy of the donor and recipient. The singling out of the Annunciation in the 1464 inventory suggests that it was especially noteworthy, which might have been because it was woven after a design by an outstanding artist.

Shortly after, in 1431, the Basel Council opened. One of the Pope's representatives in Basel, and one of the ablest supporters of the point of view of the Roman Curia, was the learned ecclesiastic Johannes de Turrecremata (Juan de Torquemada). It is known that the participants brought with them to Basel many precious objects, including tapestries, to impress the others. It is not impossible to suppose that the papal mission had with them the recent gift of the Burgundian Duke, on whose support Rome was counting, and who was himself present in Basel. If such was the case, the tapestries would have been duly admired, and possibly copied or recorded in drawings. The Winterthur painting might have been made after the Annunciation on the tapestry, singled out in the papal inventory.

The Pope was evidently very pleased with Turrecremata, for he rewarded him with the cardinal's hat upon his return to Rome in 1439. A little later, the Cardinal began various embellishments and improvements in the Dominican church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, and among other things he ordered the walls of the cloister walks to be decorated with thirty-eight frescoes with scenes from the Life of Christ. These (and one is compelled to add, "Of course!") are also no more. But a general idea of how they might have looked survives in the illustrations of the *Meditations* written by Turrecremata, and first printed in Rome in 1467 by Ulrich Hahn of Ingolstadt, Bavaria, and Vienna. In the text of one of the later editions of this book it is stated that its illustrations were made after the frescoes in Santa Maria Sopra Minerva.

There is a great similarity between the scene of the Annunciation in the woodcut illustration of this book (Figure 16) and the Winterthur panel, the single-sheet print, and the tapestry at The Cloisters (Figures 6-8). The basic composition is undeniably the same, but stripped to essentials, and omitting several details. It seems almost certain that the woodcut, the painting, the print, and the tapestry derive from the same prototype. Moreover, of the three other subjects shared by the Burgundian tapestries and the Cloisters altar frontal, the woodcut illustrations for two, the Nativity (Figure 17) and the Presentation at the Temple (Figure 18), are also not dissimilar, although the resemblance is not so close. (The remaining scene, the Coronation of the Virgin, is not illustrated in Turrecremata's book.) The Cardinal might have specified for the wall decorations scenes that would remind him of the papal tapestries.

One could end by paraphrasing slightly the words of Guyard Desmouslin, the translator and commentator of the *Bible historiale* printed in Paris in 1494: What has been told is apocryphal. May he believe it who will. There is no proof to it . . . but it is a nice story and pleasant to tell.



*19. A nun weaving a tapestry. Detail of a tapestry of the Adoration of the Magi. German, about 1490. Bavarian National Museum, Munich*

# Around Godefroid de Claire

From their primeval origins, commerce and culture have favored river valleys. Here were the natural trade routes, the easy passages by water. Inevitably, along the meandering courses of the rivers civilizations have sprung up and flourished.

From ancient times the valley of the Meuse, extending northward from the valley of the Rhone, formed with the Rhine a great system of waterways that was the main route connecting the Mediterranean world and northern Europe. Along it lay three successive capitals of Roman Gaul: Lyons, Trier, and Arles. The central part of the Meuse Valley also was crossed by several overland routes between the Atlantic coast and eastern Europe.

In the Roman period, and probably earlier, the region of the central Meuse – today largely in eastern Belgium – was known for its enamel and metalwork. Excavations at the Villa Anthée, near Namur, have uncovered remains of metal and enamel workshops of as early as the second and third centuries A.D. The output of this provincial Roman villa, and of other centers like it along the Rhine and in Britain, inspired Philostratus in the early third century to write the following oft-quoted passage: "These colors, they say, the barbarians of the [Atlantic] Ocean spread on hot bronze; they take on body, become solid and preserve what has been depicted" (*Icones*, I, xxxviii). Philostratus, who traveled through Gaul and Britain, must have seen there provincial Roman enamels similar to the two vessels in

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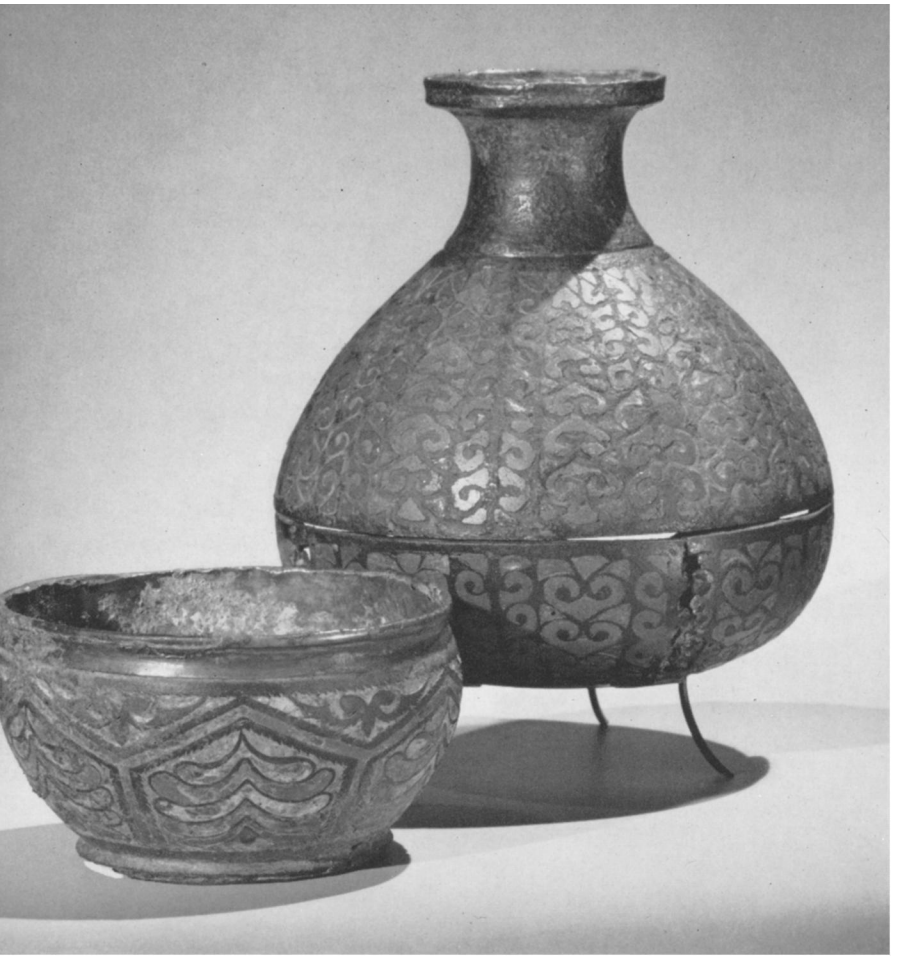
Figure 5. No one since has described so tersely the process of champlevé enameling, which is still made by scooping out hollows in a copper plate, filling them with a powdered vitreous substance mixed with water into a paste, firing the plate in an oven until the substance is thoroughly liquefied, and then letting it gradually cool. How clumsy and unpoetic is modern terminology!

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the middle of the Meuse basin became the center for a great cultural development that has received the name "Mosan." Roman villas had been replaced by thriving towns and monasteries, which offered a ready market to enamelers, metalworkers, and other craftsmen. Important centers included Namur and Le Huy to the south and Maestricht to the north, while Liège at the center had replaced the ancient *Civitas Tungrorum* (Tongres) as capital of the region, and became – even before Paris – an important seat of learning. The principality of Liège had been formed from a part of lower Lotharingia, a kingdom that had passed to Lothair, one of the sons of Charlemagne. Its prince-bishops exercised considerable power, both political and spiritual,

*1-4. The Baptism of Christ, Crucifixion, Three Marys at the Sepulcher, Pentecost. Mosan, third quarter of the XII century. Enamel on copper-gilt, all 4 inches square. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 17.190.430, 431, 419, and The Cloisters Collection, 65.105*



5. *Cup and vase. Provincial Roman, II-III century* A.D. *Enamel on bronze, heights 2 and 4¾ inches. Fletcher Fund, 47.100.8,5*

and were themselves loyal supporters of the Holy Roman Emperor. Relations with Aachen, Cologne, and other cities of the Empire were consequently close, and Mosan art reflects this trend.

Although the ancient traditions of enameling may never have been forgotten in the Meuse Valley, they were at least greatly modified and enriched by influences from the Byzantine Empire, received through Italy and Germany. Added to the sober, opaque blues and reds of the Roman period was a broad range of bright colors, a number of them deeply translucent, derived from Byzantine prototypes.

Last year the Museum acquired its finest Mosan enamel (Figure 4), rare even in this school for the brilliance and range of its color and the fluency of its engraving. It depicts the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles at Pentecost, and is the crowning piece of a group of which the Museum already owned three examples (Figures 1-3), showing the Baptism of Christ, the Crucifixion, and the Three Marys at the Sepulcher.

The spectrum of colors – particularly on the Pentecost plaque, where more than twelve hues appear – is amazingly rich and varied: not strident as with less distinguished work, but in harmonious balance. Besides the range of color, there is a variation in transparency, from opaque to brilliantly translucent. Light is reflected through the translucent enamels from the gilding beneath, which was crumpled and cracked into many surfaces by the heat of the molten enamel, and catches the light almost as brightly as a gem. Such color and luminosity could have held their own in any jeweled setting. In the few surviving Mosan reliquaries and liturgical vessels where enamels and gems are used together, they are obviously planned to harmonize.

Color to medieval man could have a metaphysical value. Suger, abbot of St. Denis and one of the great figures of the twelfth century, was very sensitive to the "sapphire glass" of his royal abbey church and to "the loveliness of the many-colored gems" on the altar of his church, "by whose contemplation" he was "transported from this inferior to that higher world." In the book he wrote about his abbey Suger adds that he ordered enamels and jewels to be combined on a great golden cross made by Mosan goldsmiths (*"aurifabros Lotharingos"*). Since these Mosan enamels must have had a brilliance equal to the best of their school to satisfy his exacting taste, can one doubt that Suger – and his contemporaries – would be as sensitive to their rich hues as to the stones with which they were mounted?

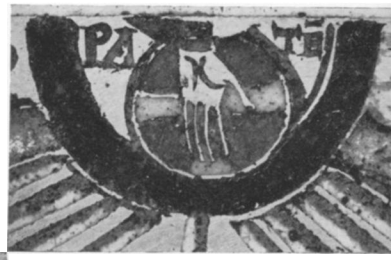
In some instances, too, color had symbolic significance. On the Pentecost plaque, for example, the unusual number of hues in the reddish spectrum, from yellow to brownish-purple, may have meaning, since red is the liturgical color of the Church for Pentecost. Even the inscription in the center of the plaque, SP[IRITU]S D[OMI]NI, is filled in with red instead of the usual blue, and matches the red rays descending from the arc of heaven upon the heads of the apostles.

The juxtaposition of different colors to create highlights and to emphasize the folds of garments adds a sense of plastic form suggestive of sculpture. Since the Mosan enameler was apparently also a metalworker, it is not surprising to find such affinities between his enamel figures and his metal statuettes and reliefs. The metal partitions within the figures, moreover, resemble the lines used to represent drapery folds in Mosan metalwork and manuscript illumination. The engraved heads are also similar both to those in the round and to those drawn in manuscripts. The delicate, nervous style of the engraving is distinctive. The heads and postures of the figures avoid mechanical repetition, and even such minor details as the pupils of the eyes are indicated with a sure touch, to represent the direction of the gaze (Cover).

The scene of Pentecost is less familiar than the other three, and iconographically more complex. *Pentecost*, meaning "fiftieth" in Greek, was first applied to the Jewish festival that came fifty days after Passover, celebrating the day Moses received the tablets of the Law. Christian Pentecost comes fifty days after Easter, and celebrates the day when the disciples of Christ "were all with one accord in one place." The book of the Acts (2:2-4) thus describes what happened:

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

*6. Detail of the Pentecost plaque*



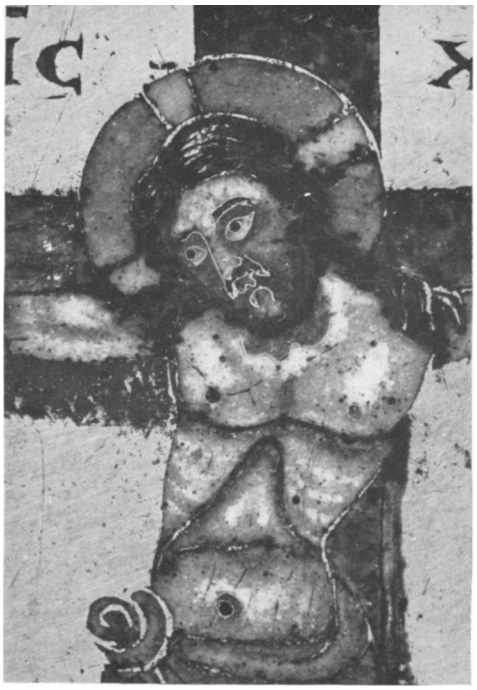
FAR LEFT:

*7. Pentecost. Detail from the St. Trond Lectionary. Mosan, middle of the XII century. The Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 883, f. 62v*

LEFT:

*8. Pentecost. Detail from a Lectionary from Cluny. First half of the XII century. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, NAL 2246, f. 79v*

9. *Detail of the Crucifixion plaque*



On this plaque St. Peter is seated squarely in the center of the group, with the other apostles evidently deferring to him. The dominance of Peter has a theological significance congenial to the Western Church – that is, to Rome, the see of Peter. It is not found in Byzantine representations, since the primacy of Peter is not stressed by the Eastern Church. The immediate source for the iconography may be German. Peter is centrally placed in a number of German manuscript illuminations of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, including the Codex Egberti in Trier and three manuscripts in Salzburg. The same iconography is followed in a Mosan Lectionary from the abbey of St. Trond (Figure 7).

No other instance comes to mind, however, in which the *left* hand of God bestows the Holy Spirit upon the apostles. In at least two examples, the St. Trond Lectionary and a manuscript from Cluny (Figure 8), Christ replaces God the Father, and in still others both are present together, probably to support the belief of the Western Church that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. In spite of the inscription PATE[R], it is possible that the hand is a curious abbreviation deriving from Christ's last blessing of the apostles (Luke 24:50). How this conflation might have come about is suggested by an ivory plaque of an altarpiece in Salerno Cathedral: it depicts a scene of Christ's last blessing directly above one of Pentecost; Christ is shown blessing the apostles with his right hand, while his left is outstretched, as in our plaque. The depiction of the left hand in our Pentecost scene, however, may be simply a mistake of the copyist, who might have reversed the model he was working from.

Of the three related plaques in the Museum, that of the Three Marys (Figure 3) is especially close. The treatment of the highlights is similar, and the same white edging occurs on the drapery at the bottom of the garments. It is difficult to tell what colors were used, since the enamel has been badly damaged, but they probably never had quite the range or richness of the Pentecost plaque. Nevertheless the architectural elements, the spacing and design of the figures (particularly the angel), and the delicate rendering of the women's hands and faces are very similar and handled with equal or even greater skill.

10. *Detail of the Baptism plaque*

11. *Christ in Majesty. Mosan, third quarter of the XII century. Enamel on copper-gilt, height 5¾ inches. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 17.190.425*

The Crucifixion plaque (Figure 2), though slightly inferior, is linked closely to the first two, especially by the drawing of the feet, and the metal partitions within the enamel fields. The colors, if less varied, are similar, such as the mottled semitranslucent purple used for the cross, and the distinctive combinations of blue with green and yellow with turquoise blue. The highlights, however, are a little more perfunctory, and the head of John, which resembles that of the apostle on the left end of the Pentecost scene, lacks some of its incisiveness. The face of Christ (Figure 9) is not engraved but enameled, and the features are delicately indicated by wire-thin cloisons, as in Byzantine work. The composition, the attitudes of the figures, and the stylized anatomy follow an Italo-Byzantine tradition, and appear in other Mosan enamels and metalwork.

Splendid as it is, the Baptism (Figure 1) is still more restricted in color, although the rich deep maroon and the combination of blue and yellow in Christ's halo occur once more. The drawing of the faces is somewhat looser and less sure. The iconography, of Byzantine origin, had already been used in the Meuse Valley in the early twelfth century, on the baptismal font by Renier of Huy in Liège, from which it could have been copied by our enameler, and appears also in a Liège manuscript contemporary with the enamels, now in the Berlin Print Room. Another Mosan plaque in the Museum, of oval shape and showing Christ in Majesty (Figure 11), is so nearly identical to the Baptism in color and engraving that it was probably made by the same artist.

The Baptism, Crucifixion, Three Marys, and Pentecost are apparently not the only survivors of what must have been an extensive series – perhaps designed to decorate some single large object such as an altarpiece. Two other plaques with Biblical subjects are un-

*12, 13. The Cleansing of Naaman, and Moses and the Brazen Serpent. Mosan, third quarter of the XII century. Enamel on copper-gilt, both 4 inches square. The British Museum, and Victoria and Albert Museum*

*Man slaying a dragon*

*14-18. Five plaques, probably from the same series as Figures 1-4 and 12-13. Mosan, third quarter of the XII century. Enamel on copper-gilt, all 4 inches square. Left, Musée du Louvre; right, Victoria and Albert Museum, lent by Lt. Col. J. C. E. Harding Rolls*

*Centaur hunting*

*Man on a camel*

*Samson and the Lion*

*Alexander in a chariot*

*19. The Pentecost plaque*

*20. The Dream of Constantine, from the Stavelot triptych. Mosan, about 1154-1158. Enamel on copper-gilt, diameter 4¼ inches. The Pierpont Morgan Library*

doubtedly part of this group. They represent Old Testament parallels to the life of Christ: Naaman being healed by washing in the Jordan (Figure 12), a prefiguration of the Baptism; and the Israelites being healed by looking upon the brazen serpent erected by Moses and Aaron (Figure 13), a prefiguration of the Crucifixion. The anatomical details and faces are nearly identical to those of the Baptism. The lettering too seems identical.

Five other plaques (Figures 14-18), though slightly different in style, may possibly also have belonged to the series. All eleven are the same size, and all have the same beaded edges and borders of white with blue or green. Even the placement of the holes, through which the plaques were attached to a background, is the same. There was similar collaboration between several masters on the great cross of St. Denis, for Suger speaks of "several goldsmiths from Lotharingia – at times five, at other times seven" – making the cross and base, "enameled with exquisite workmanship."

One hand may have done the Pentecost, the Three Marys, and perhaps the Crucifixion; another, the Baptism, the Naaman, and the Brazen Serpent; and still another, the last group, consisting of Samson and the Lion, Alexander the Great borne aloft in a chariot, a centaur drawing his bow, a man slaying a dragon, and another riding a camel. Despite some differences in color and design, enough technical and stylistic similarities exist to indicate that the enamelers were in the same workshop, or closely related ones. The centaur's body is close to that of Christ in the Crucifixion plaque, and Alexander's face is quite like several on the other plaques. There are further resemblances in some of the ground lines and costume details.

Even in subject matter the last group is not so dissimilar as it at first seems. The threefold combination of New Testament scenes with Old Testament parallels and with parallels from the world of nature and mythology was congenial to an age that clearly saw a cosmological unity centered around Christian doctrine. Samson (to be distinguished from Hercules by his long hair) tearing open the lion's mouth prefigures Christ's descent into hell to

break open the jaws of Hades, which would have been an appropriate subject for the New Testament group of enamels. The camel carrying a rider with a whip may stand for Christ bearing the gentile people converted to the Christian faith – Rabanus Maurus of Mainz uses this image to signify Christ's humility (P. L. III, 211). The camel can also be a symbol of obedience, one of the Virtues, and might even prefigure a missing plaque of Christ bearing the cross. The man slaying a dragon suggests the struggle between good and evil. The centaur may represent lust, or possibly Sagittarius, one of the twelve signs of the zodiac, which was often associated with religious themes. Alexander carried upward in his chariot might be a parallel for the Ascension of Christ, another plaque that may have been lost from the first group. Alexander is also sometimes a symbol of pride or arrogance, one of the Vices.

Only hints may be gathered as to the original setting and use of these plaques. Parts of another such series, representing the Passion, survive in the Brussels museum (Figure 23), and their shapes and dimensions suggest that they once formed a triptych for an altar. A more direct hint that our series might also have been made for an altar comes from a far grander and more famous source, the retable and frontal of the main altar of the abbey church at Stavelot, southeast of Liège. It was created, as were these enamels, in the twelfth century, and was decorated with silver-gilt reliefs showing scenes of the Passion and Resurrection. Unfortunately it was melted down in 1794, and we must depend largely upon a 1724 description by two Benedictine monks, Martène and Durand. The relief on the altar frontal represented Pentecost. A contemporary Mosan relief of Pentecost, on a copper-gilt altar retable in the Cluny Museum, shows Christ taking the place of God the Father as in the Cluny and St. Trond manuscripts, and as perhaps on our plaque. It may have been copied from the Stavelot altar.

Another clue relating our group of enamels to Stavelot is found in a seventeenth-century drawing of a second altar retable at Stavelot, that of St. Remaclus, which has also disap-

*21. The Baptism of Constantine, from the Stavelot triptych*

*22. The Three Marys plaque*

peared. The drawing shows a Christ in Majesty with enough similarities in the arrangement of the drapery, the cross within the omega, and the face and enlarged blessing hand to indicate that it was probably the model for the Christ of our oval plaque.

There is an additional reason for associating the series of plaques with Stavelot, namely their relation to the "Stavelot triptych," a small silver-gilt altarpiece, decorated with jewels and enameled roundels (Figures 20, 21), made about 1154 to 1158. Our Pentecost and Three Marys plaques in particular are similar to several of the triptych medallions in the general spacing of the figures, in the use of trilobed arches and in other architectural details, and in the range of colors, including a light translucent green rarely found in Mosan enameling. The same trilobed composition also appeared on the enameled plaques of the St. Remaclus altar.

The association of our pieces with Stavelot may suggest the influence of an important patron, who appears to have supplied much of the impetus for the arts in this area. Wibald, abbot of Stavelot from 1130 until his death in 1158, made extensive restorations and gifts to his monastery and the churches under his control. The most impressive array of existing Mosan enamels has emanated from Stavelot, most of them apparently dating from Wibald's term of office. In 1145 Wibald gave the abbey a reliquary head of Pope Alexander, and at a later date a portable altar, both covered with enamel plaques, and both now in the Brussels museum. He also presented the now-destroyed St. Remaclus altar and main altar to his abbey, and apparently the Stavelot triptych as well. It is likely that he gave smaller works to dependent churches. In style, our plaques seem to be a later phase of that of the Stavelot triptych, which was made toward the end of Wibald's life; and therefore it seems more likely that they represent a continuation of his influence after his death, rather than a direct commission from him.

For many years it has been assumed that most of the finest Mosan enamels of this period were all made in the workshop of one great master, Godefroid de Claire, or, as he is now often called, Godefroid de Huy. The edifice that scholarship has built upon this name is, however, very shaky. As Peter Lasko put it, not one existing enamel can with certainty be attributed to Godefroid. The encomiums that give us his name were all written some time after his death, which probably occurred in the 1170s. Godefroid is associated with Abbot Wibald of Stavelot only on the strength of a letter that Wibald wrote in 1148 to "Dear son, G, the Goldsmith," requesting him to deliver as soon as he could the objects ordered long before. The variety of styles attributed to Godefroid have made us even less sure of his identity and have unfortunately dimmed some useful groupings of enamels around his name. Nevertheless, to throw out, bag and baggage, both the name and the attributions and to start all over again would create useless chaos. To paraphrase Voltaire, if the name were not there it would have to be invented, if only to provide a label for valid associations of enamels. To discard it completely, furthermore, risks losing whatever grains of truth may be buried in the "traditions" and in hearsay, and they are not always negligible.

For surely we have to do with a great master and with several associates. Such anonymity seems today so appalling that we long for a name, or names, to call our masters by. We cannot abide the calm words of Suger who merely says that "at times five, at other times seven" goldsmiths worked on his great cross. Suger would have obtained the best masters, and one of these, we say, *must* have been Godefroid because he was so famous. Yet is it we who have made him so? In all honesty there is no answer and, strictly speaking, we must remain content with a nameless master, probably with several. History does not always oblige, and the attribution must remain "around Godefroid de Claire" until better-substantiated evidence appears.

NOTES

This group was first recognized by H. P. Mitchell, with additions and changes by Erich Steingräber, Hubert Landais, and Peter Lasko. The Pentecost plaque has been published by Hanns Swarzenski and Peter Lasko; its history is not known before its purchase by Sir Francis Scott (1824-1863), who bequeathed it to the Birmingham and Midland Institute.

I should like to thank Rosalie Green, Hubert Landais, Charles Oman, John Plummer, Meyer Schapiro, and Felice Stampfle for their assistance and advice.

THE ENAMELS

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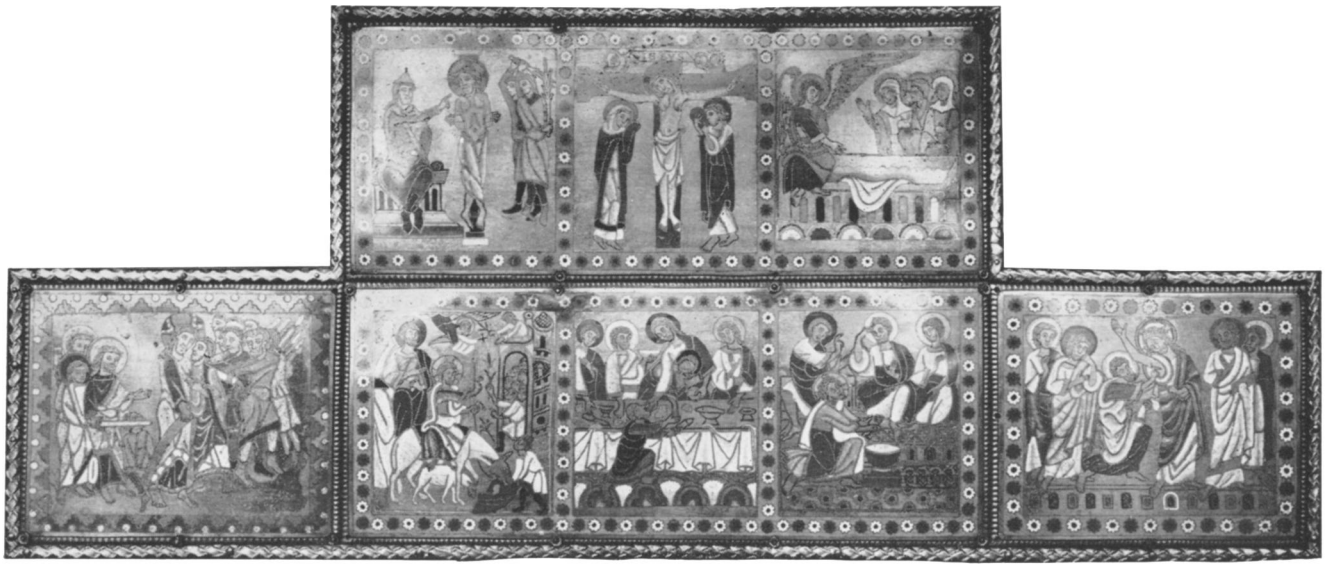
*23. Plaques from a triptych. Mosan, second half of the XII century. Enamel on copper-gilt. Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels*



# A Jewel of St. Catherine

BONNIE YOUNG *Senior Lecturer, The Cloisters*

"CATHERINE, the daughter of King Costus, learned in the study of all the liberal arts, of incredible beauty and admired by the eyes of all, shone out in Alexandria in Egypt in the time of the Emperor Maxentius." Thus opens the story of St. Catherine as it is told in the *Belles Heures* of Jean, duke of Berry. In the accompanying illustration (Figure 1), illuminated with all the elegance of the early fifteenth century, Catherine is shown in her study, described in *The Golden Legend*, the lives of the saints, as a tower "with divers studies and chambers" that her father had built for her in his palace, where she might receive training from the "seven best masters and wisest in conning that might be gotten in those parts." As a princess she wears a crown, and as a saint, a halo. What better combination to suit the taste of a medieval prince – or princess: a heroine whose tale combined the familiar richness and routine of court life with the suffering and martyrdom of a champion of Christianity.

Catherine was fourteen when her father died, and shortly thereafter her people approached her and asked that they might "provide some noble knight or prince to marry



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you, to the end that he might rule and defend your realm." But Catherine, secretly determined to remain a virgin, decided to set such difficult standards for her future husband that it would be virtually impossible to fulfill them. She said she would marry only a man who had such "noble blood that all men shall do him worship, . . . so rich that he pass all others in riches, and so full of beauty that angels have joy to behold him, and so pure that his mother be a virgin." The first two specifications might be those of any haughty fairy-tale princess, but the others are more in keeping with the requirements of a saint. The court was much abashed by Catherine's words; her mother pleaded with her, but Catherine replied "with piteous sighing: 'Madam, I wot well by very reason that there is one much better than I can devise him, and but he by his grace find me, I shall never have joy.' "

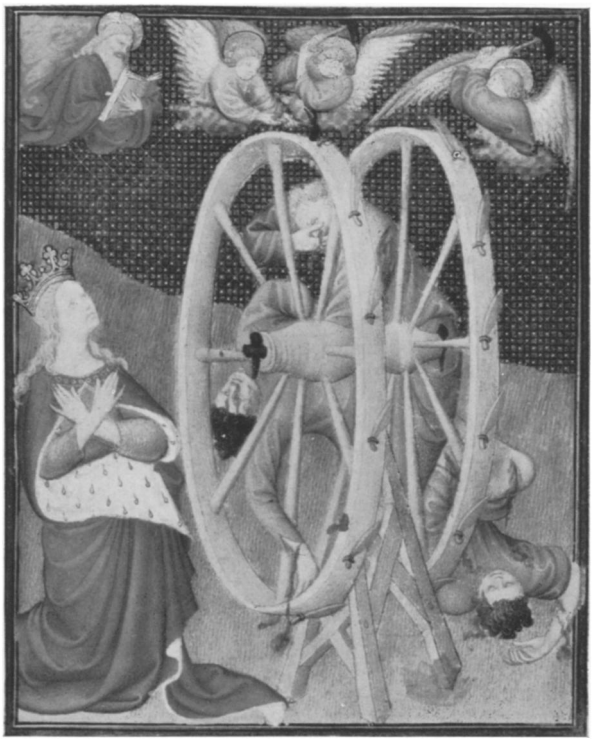
In the meantime, near Alexandria there lived a hermit named Adrian; the Virgin Mary appeared to him and asked him to go to Catherine and say to her that "the lady saluteth her whose son she has chosen to her lord and husband . . . and that this same lord . . . desireth her beauty and loveth her chastity among all virgins on earth." Adrian made his way to Catherine's castle, delivered the message, and Catherine "arose forgetting her estate and meiny" and, unknown to anyone, followed him through Alexandria into the desert. There the Virgin Mary welcomed her, and when Catherine was baptized the Virgin led her to Christ: "Our Lord espoused her in joining himself to her by spiritual marriage . . . and in token of this set a ring on her finger."

After Catherine returned to Alexandria, she found the Emperor Maxentius requiring all to worship pagan idols; Catherine refused and challenged him, so the Emperor called the wisest philosophers of his realm to dispute with her. Catherine then succeeded in converting to Christianity these philosophers as well as the Empress and other members of the court. The Emperor grew more and more enraged, and decreed that Catherine's body be broken by a pair of wheels set all around with sharp razors, but in this attempt he was foiled, for when "this blessed virgin was set in tor-

OPPOSITE:
*1. St. Catherine in her study*

BELOW:
*2, 3. The breaking of the wheels, and St. Catherine's body transported to Mt. Sinai*

*Illustrations from the Belles Heures of the Duke of Berry, illuminated by the Limbourg brothers. Franco-Netherlandish, between 1410-1413. Each about 4 x 3¼ inches. The Cloisters Collection, 54.1.1*



*4. St. Catherine. French (probably Paris), about 1400-1410. Gold, with enamel and jewels. Height 3¾ inches. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 17.190.905*

ment, the angel of our Lord brake the wheels by so great force that it slew four thousand pagans" (Figure 2). Finally, after the wheels had failed, Catherine, like so many other martyrs, was a victim of the axe. As she was about to be beheaded, she prayed to Christ: " 'Good king, I beseech and pray thee that whomsoever shall remember my passion, be it at his death or in any other necessity, and call me, that he may have by thy mercy the effect of his request and prayer.' And then came a voice to her, saying: 'Come unto me, my fair love and my spouse; lo! behold the gate of heaven is open to thee, and also to them that shall hallow thy passion.' "

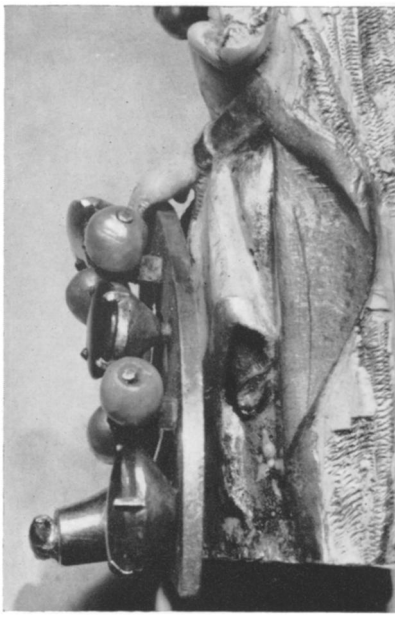
Catherine's legend has fairy-tale qualities in more ways than one, for no such princess is recorded in the history of Alexandria at the time of Maxentius in the early fourth century; in reality, she seems never to have existed at all. According to *The Golden Legend* her body, which had been carried to Mt. Sinai by angels (Figure 3) and there buried, was later miraculously discovered by the holy hermits who lived in the desert and placed in a little chapel where many miracles took place. Relics from what was believed to be Catherine's tomb were transferred at some point in the Middle Ages, probably in the twelfth century, to the nearby Monastery of St. Catherine, where they remain today. Thus Catherine's legend, closely connected with Mt. Sinai, originated in the East; it was first recorded in the tenth century in a Greek liturgical book, the *Menologium Basilianum.* Once started, her legend grew and traveled westward, appealing to common people as well as princes, so that in the following centuries she became one of the most popular saints in medieval Christendom.

Catherine was famous in France as early as the eleventh century, for in 1030 a monk from Mt. Sinai, while on a mission to collect alms for the monastery from the dukes of Normandy, placed some of her relics in the abbey of La Trinité-du-Mont near Rouen. This abbey soon became so well known for miracles attributed to these relics that it was renamed in her honor. The popularity of another shrine dedicated to Catherine, founded in 1375, is an indication of her continued and ever-growing renown in France in the later Middle Ages. This chapel, at Fierbois, near Chinon in Touraine, by 1400 was already so much frequented that a special hostel was built to house the many pilgrims who came there. Joan of Arc visited St. Catherine-de-Fierbois in 1429 on her way to seek out the Dauphin, and it was there that her miraculous sword was said to have been discovered. That Catherine was one of the saints who appeared to Joan indicates that saint's appeal to the lowborn, while works of art such as the *Belles Heures*, where her story is illustrated with eleven full-page miniatures, show her popularity in court circles.

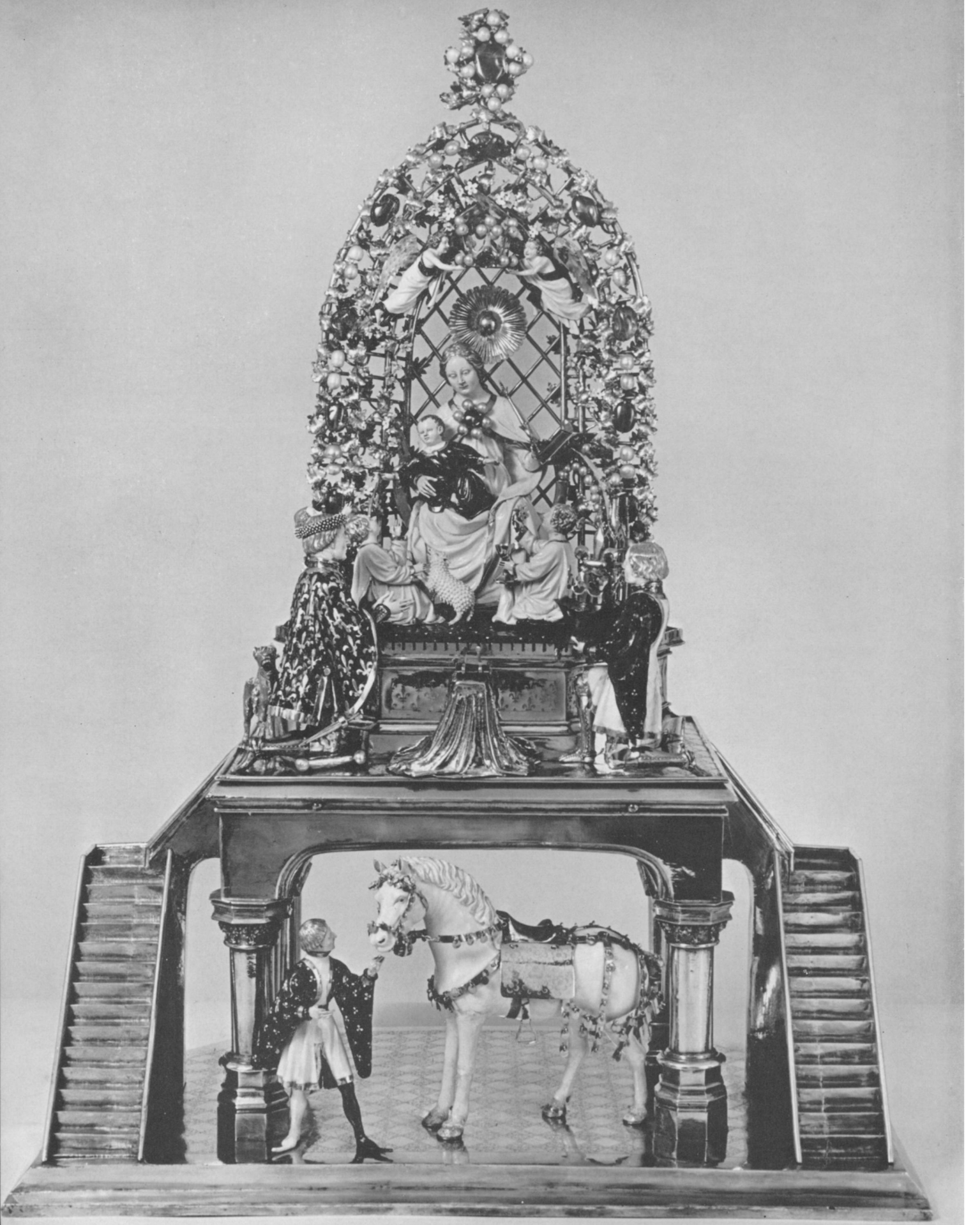
In addition to the *Belles Heures* the Duke of Berry also owned precious metalwork in which St. Catherine played a prominent part, for the Duke's inventories, as well as those of his nephew King Charles VI of France and other members of the royal family, list costly "jewels" of silver and gold in which she appeared.

St. Catherine is portrayed in just such a "jewel" of this period (Figure 4), shown in the Museum's medieval treasury: a half-length statuette, less than four inches high, made of gold, partially enameled in white and flesh tones, and set with precious gems. She is regally crowned, but has no halo to proclaim her sainthood; instead she rests a hand on one of her most familiar symbols, the broken wheel. This delicate and sophisticated piece, like the illuminations in the *Belles Heures*, exemplifies the supreme elegance and luxury of the French court in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries.

The enamel technique used to decorate this statuette was developed in the late fourteenth century, and is often referred to today as *émail en* [or *sur*] *ronde bosse*: that is, enamel on sculpture in the round or in high relief, as compared to the older *basse taille* technique, where enamel was placed on a flat surface that had been chiseled and engraved in low relief. In both techniques powdered glass, mixed with a liquid to form a thin paste, was applied to the metallic base, then fired to a point where the glass melted and fused into a uniformly smooth



5. *Detail of the Museum's statuette of St. Catherine*



coating. In *basse taille* enamel, silver, because of its neutral color, was often preferred to gold as a base for the delicate translucent hues then used.

In *émail en ronde bosse* a different but equally beautiful effect was achieved when a pure gold core was largely covered with opaque white enamel. In our statuette, for example, details such as Catherine's hair and the border of her cloak, left in the natural gold, stand out in glistening contrast to the flesh tones of her face and the white of her robe. In addition to the striking effect created by this new gold and enamel technique, there may have been another, very practical reason why opaque enamel usually covered the larger part of the core. In parts of the statuette where bits of the white enamel are missing (Figure 5), we can see how the gold surface was roughened to provide better support for the enamel during firing. With translucent enamel, the rough incised lines of the gold surface would have been apparent, as would certain inequalities in the depth of the enamel that might occur during the firing of the freely curved surfaces. Opaque enamel would conceal the scores in the gold and give an impression of uniform depth to the finish.

Nonetheless, in *émail en ronde bosse* translucent enamels were often used in addition to white. Traces of red and green on our statuette indicate that Catherine's gown and the lining of her cloak were once so covered. Although the gold in these areas is slightly textured, it was not given the more deeply roughened surface used for the opaque tones, and possibly as a consequence the translucent enamel is almost entirely gone. Hidden under Catherine's wheel, however, is a little patch of translucent red with a dainty three-petaled flower of white (Figure 5). Still beautiful today, one cannot help imagining how exquisite the statuette must have been when her gown, in clear red covered with tiny white flowers, contrasted with the white gold-bordered cloak and its blue-green lining.

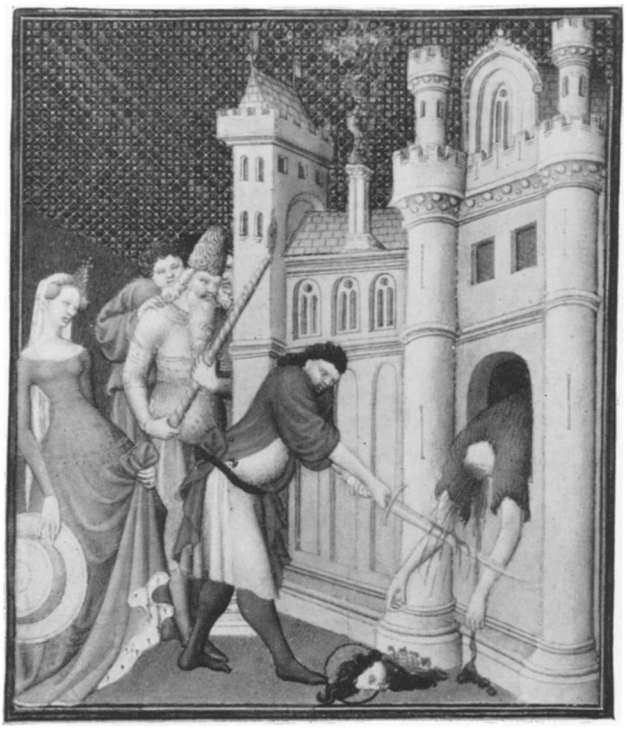
*6. "The Little Golden Horse." French (probably Paris), about 1403. Gold, with enamel and jewels. Height 24½ inches. Convent church, Altötting. Photograph: Bavarian National Museum, Munich*

Probably the most magnificent example of medieval *émail en ronde bosse* is the so-called Little Golden Horse shrine (Figure 6) now in the convent church at Altötting near Munich. It is also particularly important in the study of this technique, as it is the only object of this type and period that can be identified with certainty in a contemporary document. Almost all the similar medieval jewels listed in the royal inventories of the time have long since disappeared, but the Little Golden Horse shrine is included in a 1405 inventory of King Charles VI. It was a present from his wife, Isabeau of Bavaria, for the "first day of the year" 1404, and was described as "an image of Our Lady who holds her child, seated in a garden made in the fashion of a trellis, and Our Lady is enameled in white and the child in clear red and the aforesaid figure has a clasp on her chest garnished with six pearls and a ruby." Above the head of the Virgin was a crown of gold, held by two angels, "garnished with two rubies, a sapphire and six pearls," possibly a reminder of the jeweled gold crown that children dressed as angels placed on the head of Queen Isabeau herself, in the lavish pageantry that had attended the celebration of her official entry into Paris in 1389. Adoring the Virgin and Child are the young John the Baptist, John the Evangelist, and the always popular Catherine. The figure of Catherine goes unnoticed in the illustration, as it is hidden behind John the Baptist, but the Child is extending to her a ring, the symbol of her mystic marriage to Christ. Below are kneeling images of King Charles and an attendant. At the very bottom, held by a varlet, is the little golden horse itself, described in the inventory as "enameled in white with a saddle and harness of gold."

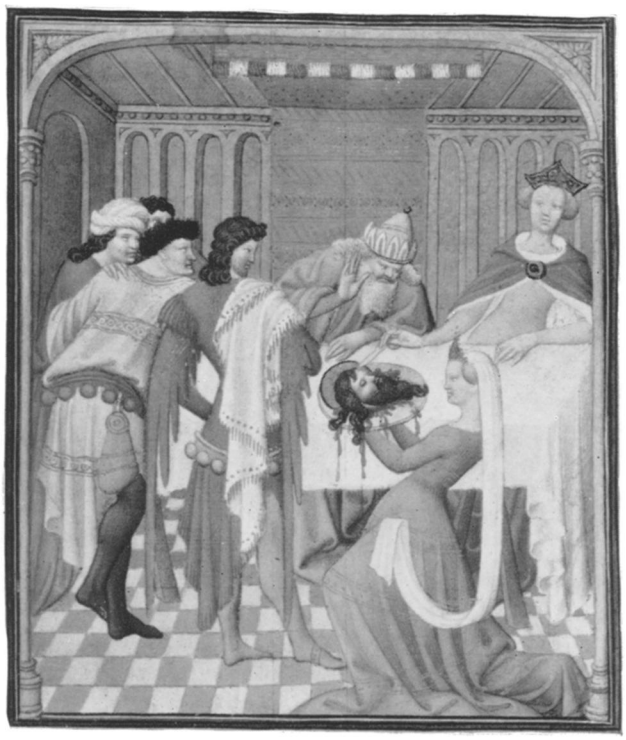
Since this piece was evidently presented to the King on January 1, 1404 it seems reasonable to believe that it was ordered in 1403, and Paris is generally accepted as the place of its manufacture. Traditionally Paris was an important center for various forms of artistic enterprise, and specifically it had a long and continuous tradition of fine goldsmith's work.

*7. Virgin and Child. French (probably Paris), about 1400-1410. Gold, with enamel and jewels. Height 6¼ inches. Cathedral treasury, Toledo*

*8. The Museum's statuette of St. Catherine*



9. *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist. Illumination from the Belles Heures of the Duke of Berry*



10. *Salome with the head of St. John the Baptist. Illumination from the Belles Heures of the Duke of Berry*

During the fourteenth century the city was the most famous in France for work in both gold and enamel, as is attested by the Cloisters silver-gilt and enamel reliquary shrine, probably made for Queen Elizabeth of Hungary by Parisian goldsmiths around the middle of the century (see "A Shrine for a Queen" by Margaret B. Freeman, in the June 1963 *Bulletin*). Although the shrine is decorated mainly with translucent *basse taille* enamel, it points, in one way, to the later *émail en ronde bosse* technique, for the hands and faces of the silver-gilt statues within are painted in lifelike flesh tones, giving an effect similar to that later achieved with opaque enamel.

The Museum's St. Catherine is so close in style to the Little Golden Horse that it must surely be a product of the same time and place. If we compare the bust of St. Catherine (Figure 8) with the head and shoulders of the Virgin in the Altötting shrine, there is a striking similarity between the two in details of costume and in the arrangement of jewels in the clasps and crowns. Much the same combination of sapphires, pale rubies, and pearls that adorns the Little Golden Horse was used to decorate St. Catherine, for in the center of her brooch is a pale, rosy pink stone; two others of similar hue alternate with sapphires and pearls in her wheel, and in the center of her crown is another sapphire. In addition, Catherine's features, in particular the nose, mouth, and chin, look like those of the Virgin. One other detail (not visible in the illustrations) that closely links Catherine with the Altötting shrine is her distinctive, tightly curled coiffure – the very same hair style worn by the St. Catherine in the shrine.

There is at least one other piece closely enough related in style to suggest that it too came from the same Parisian source: a seated Virgin and Child in the treasury of Toledo Cathedral (Figure 7). Comparable in size to the statuette of Catherine, it has the same type of jeweled crown and white gold-bordered cloak, and, again, is very similar in facial type.

The date of the Museum's statuette should be around 1403, or at least between 1400 and 1410. This dating is corroborated by illustrations in manuscripts of the period, in which ladies are shown with similar hair styles and costumes, and wear similar clasps and crowns. In the *Belles Heures*, illuminated between 1410 and 1413, both Salome and Herodias have similar crowns and coiffures (Figures 9, 10), and Herodias has a clasp very much like that worn by Catherine. The bride in the illustrations of the Marriage at Cana in two other Books of Hours, made for the Duke around 1400-1409, are also close in details of jewelry and coiffure.

The statuette of St. Catherine is said to have come from a convent in Clermont-Ferrand, in the Auvergne, and to have once been part of a pax, an object made in varying forms and used during the Middle Ages in connection with the kiss of peace during the Mass. Since the back of our statuette is flattened, suggesting placement against a background or in a niche, it does seem likely that it was once part of a larger unit. It need not have belonged to a pax, but might have been included in any one of several types of objects described in the inventories of the period. St. Catherine was part, for instance, of a little "*tableau d'or*" in the shape of a tower listed in Charles VI's inventory of 1399. In the Duke of Berry's inventory of 1402 is described another little *tableau d'or* with images of St. John the Baptist and St. Catherine, in relief and enameled, and garnished with rubies, sapphires, and pearls.

The object that sounds as if it were closest to our statuette, even though enamel is not specifically mentioned and the jewels differ somewhat, is described in a 1408 inventory of possessions of King Charles's sister-in-law, the Duchess of Orleans. It was still another little *tableau d'or*, within which was a St. Catherine holding a palm set with six small diamonds, and with a half wheel on which were three diamonds, a ruby, and a sapphire; on her chest was a clasp with six pearls surrounding a little ruby, and on her head a crown of gold with fourteen pearls, two diamonds, and a sapphire. This crown sounds very like that on the statuette; the clasp, almost identical. In overall composition as well the two seem very similar, particularly since the object once held in an empty slot in the statuette's right hand was doubtless a martyr's palm.

As has often been noted, precious metalwork and jewels can easily be, and very frequently were, converted into cash when their owners were in need of funds; objects such as the St. Catherine could be melted down, sold, or, as was the case with the Little Golden Horse, pawned. Charles VI left his New Year's present with his brother-in-law, Duke Ludwig of Bavaria; he never redeemed it and in the early sixteenth century it found haven at Altötting. Practically all of the objects in the Duke of Berry's collection of goldsmith's work were melted down, both before and after his death, to pay for the expenses of war, and this was also true of other princely collections of the time. And so today very few such jewels are still in existence. The Museum is most fortunate to have in the little St. Catherine an example of this rare type of medieval enamelwork – a vestige, at least, of the splendor of court life in the late Middle Ages.

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# JAMES J. RORIMER

In the early hours of the morning, Wednesday, May 11, 1966, James J. Rorimer, Director of the Metropolitan Museum, died quietly in his sleep.

Only the afternoon before, he had been with the Trustees at their May meeting. He was in rare good form and spirit and remarked afterward that it had been an unusually happy and constructive meeting.

When word of his death came to the Museum on Wednesday morning, the Trustees and staff were stunned by the unbelievable news. The Museum remained open, as Mr. Rorimer would have wished, but there was silence through its great halls.

The news spread quickly, and within a matter of hours cables and telegrams and messages came to the Museum from all over the world. A great museum director, a great scholar, and a good friend was no more.

On the Monday afternoon following his death, a simple memorial service was held for James Rorimer at his beloved Cloisters. The number of friends, personal and professional, who attended was a living tribute to a rare person.

As this issue of the *Bulletin* is on the presses as this is written, there is no opportunity to include more than this brief notice. A subsequent issue will pay more suitable honor to our late Director.

All of us at The Metropolitan Museum of Art extend our heartfelt sympathy to Mr. Rorimer's family, and share our irreparable loss with the whole world of art.

For the Trustees, officers, and staff.

Arthur A. Houghton, Jr., *President*

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JAMES J. RORIMER

1905-1966

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